



HUNDRED RED SCALES

THE GODDESS, BLEEDING

A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS

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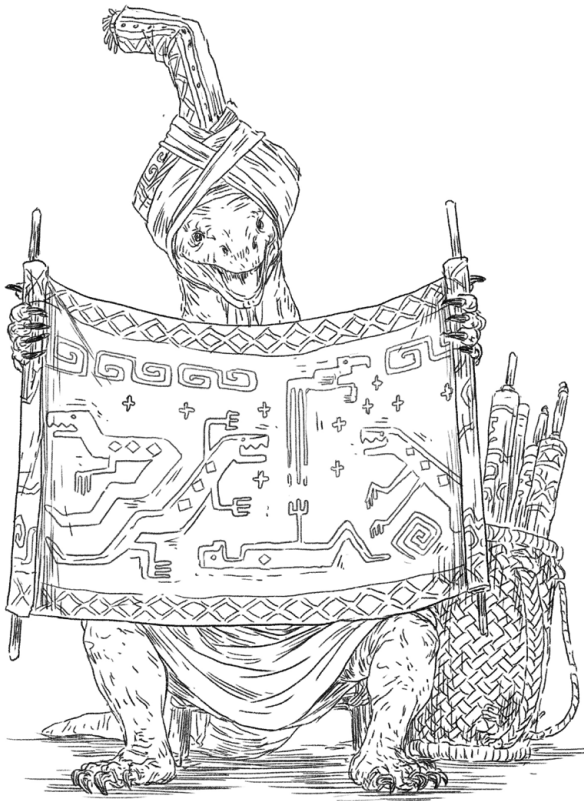
TEXT ZEDECK SIEW
ILLUSTRATIONS MUNKAO

A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS

TWELVE TWIST TONGUE, TOURING NOVELIST

He holds up two fingers and stamps his feet. "Twelve," he says. Wiggles his head so his hat wobbles. "Twist." Tastes the air. "Tongue."

The audience applauds. "Thank you, thank you!" Twelve Twist Tongue says. His mouth and voice are not in sync; he speaks like a foreign-language dub. "Glad to be with you all. My first time in your city!"



Twelve Twist Tongue holds up a scroll. The figures within are woven into the cloth, in browns and bright reds. As he unrolls the right side he rolls up the left -- it is a moving picture, tableau after tableau, in sequence.

He begins: "In the time before time ..."

HUNDRED RED SCALE

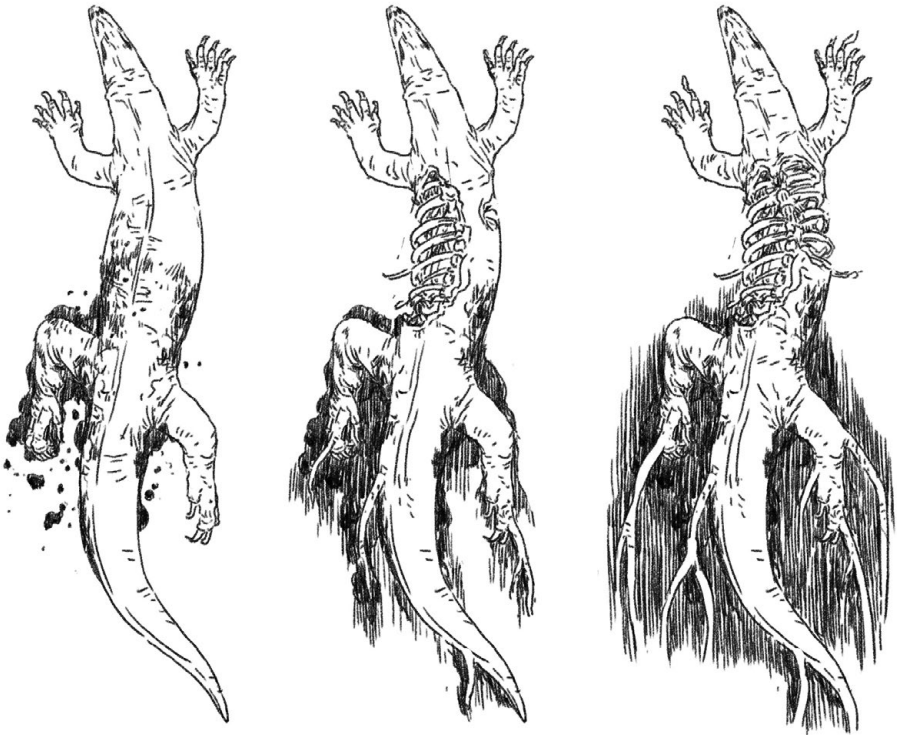
In the time before time, Pa the man-god swam the breadth of the sea so he could be wed to the goddess Hundred Red Scale.

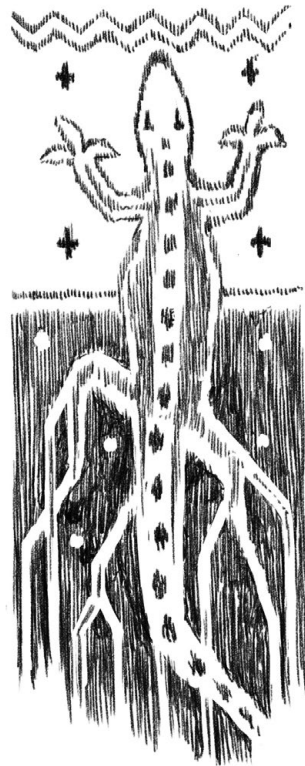
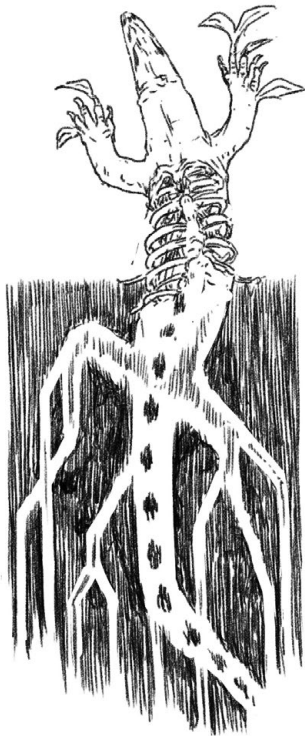
Hundred Red Scale's gift was beauty: she had a jewelled hide, gleaming in every shade of ruby.

Hundred Red Scale's genius was love: she learned passion from her mother the earth, and practiced her lissom arts with orchid and otter, tiger and tern, heaving river and hard mountain.

Lover to all, she was loved by all.

This made her husband unhappy. Pa the man-god felt jealousy. Swimming the sea, on their return journey, she coupled with the fishes they met. And these fishes raised hymns to Hundred Red Scale.





Hearing praise for her, but none for him, her husband became enraged. He murdered her: cut off her head and hands and tail. Broke her teeth. Drank her blood.

After which Pa the man-god departed, leaving her pieces there, counting on the sea to swallow his sin.

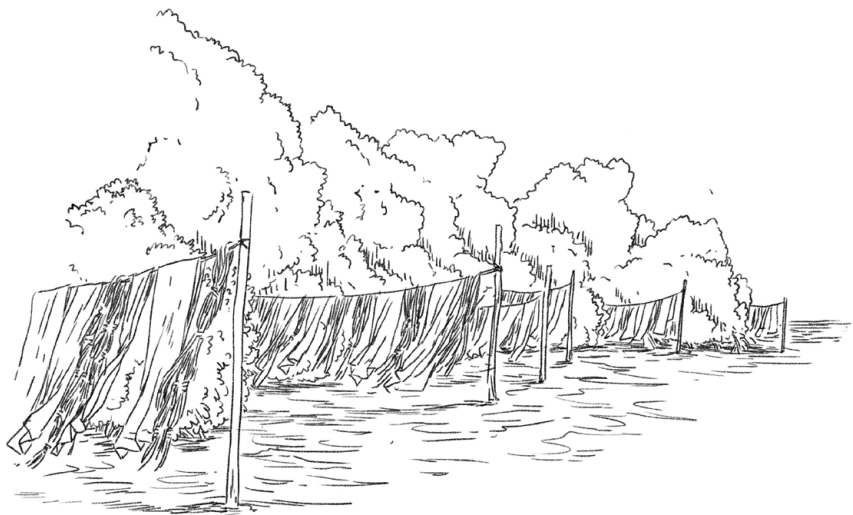
But the waves fell in love with Hundred Red Scale, even as they ate her. They could not forget. Where they broke they whispered songs of her love -- and in such places mangroves grew:

Trees whose bark still weep the colour of the goddess Hundred Red Scale's beauty.

THREE DAYS, ISLAND-HOPPING EASTWARDS

Laundry lines stretch out past the mangrove trees. They flap like sails over the water: skeins of yarn, sheets of cloth, dyed this morning.

ENCOUNTERS IN THE HUNDRED RED SCALES



2 A shadow blots the sun. Sri Suka is a brahminy kite the size of an airplane. She wheels overhead, judging the world and you in it.

3 A child. Shining all over like onyx, or syrup. A cowrie spirit. Killed, its skin calcifies. The shine remains. Worth a lot of cash, to collectors.

4 Tired drums. Fainting oarsmen, pompous officers. War-boats from King Narawatu's shattered fleet. Doing some light pirating.

5 The fizz of foam. A crab knight, his fighting claw thick as your torso. "Trespassing cur!" he bubbles. Honours demands he duel you.

6 A blood-red tidal flat. The slush is coated with red-berry snails, each tinier than a peppercorn. Step anywhere and they quickly coat you.

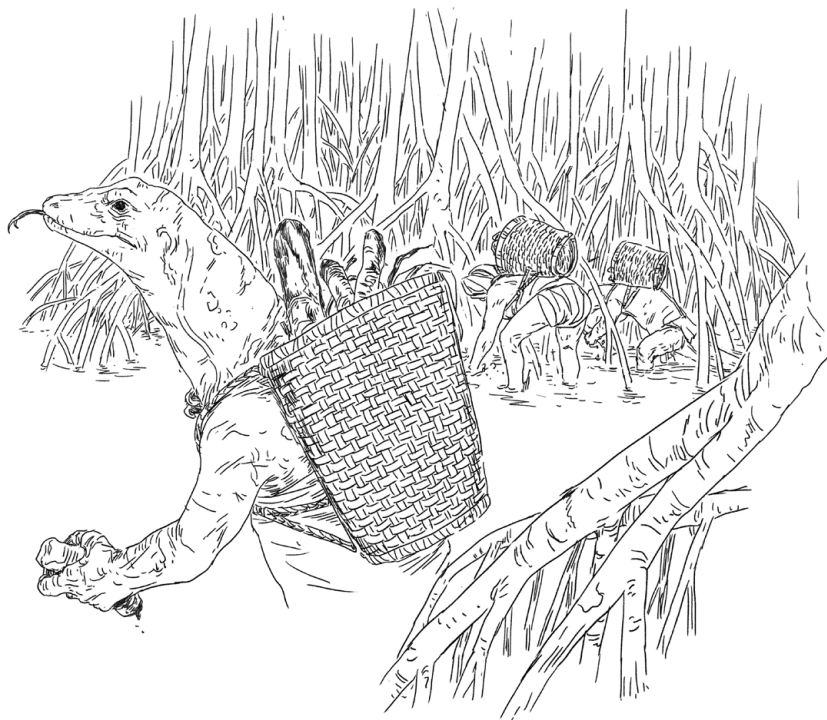
7 Horns, to get your attention. A barge laden with silk and cotton. Merchants, here to trade for local textiles. They are as lost as you are.

8 Screaming. Mudskippers! Mouths wide ovals, fins spotted silver. As large and as fast as feral hounds. As pack-minded. And as hungry.

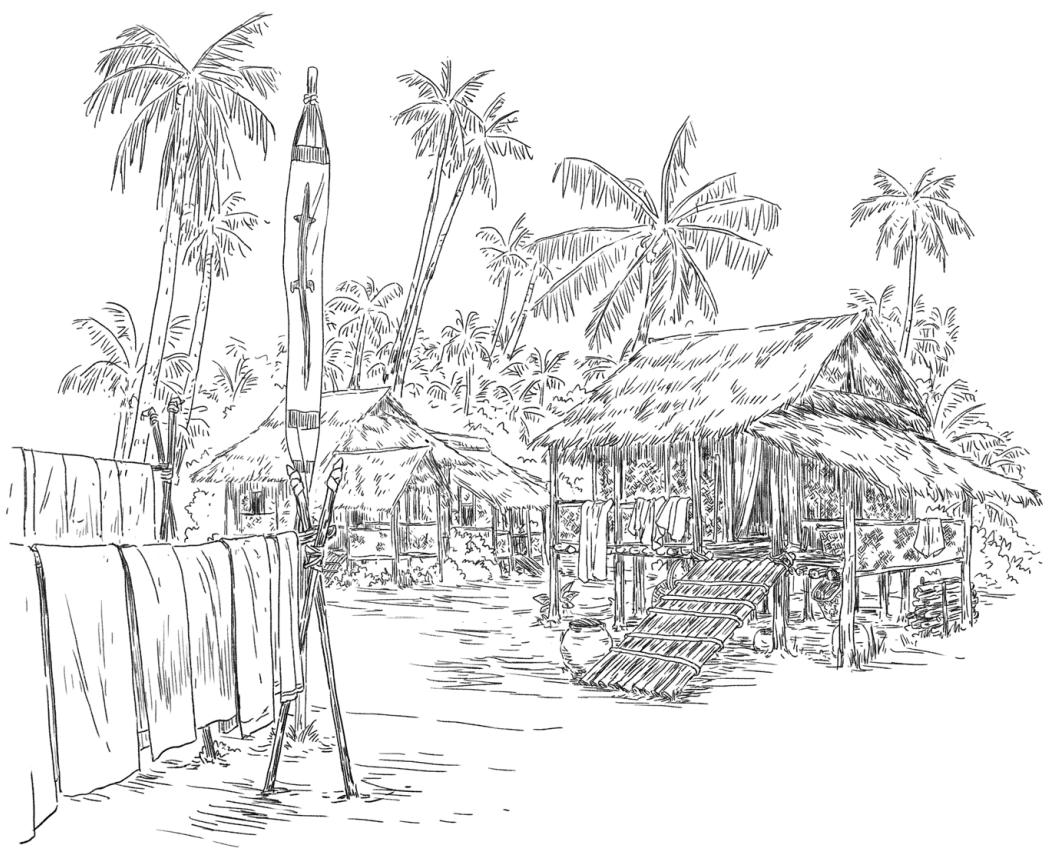
- 9 The clack of pebbles. Monitor-folk skins, emptied of flesh, filled with stones -- reanimated. Their disquiet souls famished, desperate.
- 10 Squelching. You are being stalked. A mud crocodile oozes its silt body through the roots of a nearby tree. Its tiny sea-glass eye staring.
- 11 A crude rainbow stain spreads to coat the surf, the rocks. The air tastes acrid. An oil demon. Will cover your shins, get into your mouth.
- 12 A shadow darkens the tide. Sri Duka is a blue coral snake the size of a pipe-line. Paralytic venom. Will bite a victim, steal them away.



If you roll doubles there are villagers here, foraging for cockles and bait-worms, harvesting the mangroves' sanguine bark. They sign you to follow; their homes are not far.



VILLAGES OF THE HUNDRED RED SCALES



All are children of the goddess, and swear filial piety to her temple on Little Red Scale. They squabble as siblings do.

Their names are always in three parts. This one is called:



1 “Low” -- On stilts, smelly, strewn across an intertidal plain.

2 “Tall” -- Perched on a cliff, creaky, buffeted by crosswinds.

3 “Late” -- Newly-lacquered houses in a freshly-cut clearing.

4 “Twin” -- A string of fish farms, adrift between two islands.

5 “Nested” -- In torchlit limestone caves. Not fully explored.

6 “Tearful” -- No monitor-folk live here. Shunned and sullen.

7 “Fat” -- Fields of bowing paddy. Buffalo and stuffed barns.

8 “New” -- Next to barnacle-ridden, certainly-haunted ruins.

9 “Far” -- A day out to sea, often raided by otter-folk pirates.

10 “Neat” -- Homes in a row on the riverbank. Parked boats.

And:

1 “Gold” -- A big trader’s hall. Rarely used, its welcome pennants dulled.

2 “Grease” -- A big mill. Sacks full of fatty fruit go in; jugs of oil come out.

3 “Thin” -- Its artisans do not work cotton -- only silk. Superiority complex.

4 “Top” -- Next to a hill, bare and sooty, visited nightly by the lightning god.

5 “Salt” -- Next to a dead reef, visited every year by a weeping turtle god.

6 “Smoke” -- Pools of hot sulphurous water, used in magic and medicine.

7 “Old” -- A beach of whale bones, instead of sand. Every bit sings softly.

- 8 "Orphan" -- Founded by an exiled queen, its chiefs wield her war-spear.
- 9 "Firm" -- Its artisans do not work silk -- only cotton. Superiority complex.
- 10 "Feather" -- A third of locals are bird-folk: snipes and stilts and storks.



And: “Scale”.

Feuding with its closest neighbour, because:

1 A master of the dye art, born here, but he married, and moved there --
damned traitor!

2 They claim they pioneered the Suppliant Frog motif -- what lies! Our weavers
did that.

3 Ewal's girl ran off with that winking dancer of theirs! They are all filthy cra-
dle-snatchers.

4 Thieves! We caught their boys in the bay three nights ago, emptying out our
crab pots.

5 Their chieftess is from the mainland. She knows all the traders, and hogs their
custom!

6 Heard their chief has a live-in witch. To put curses on us! We need a witch of
our own.

7 After a game of checkers their man knifed one of ours. Murderers -- worse:
sore losers!

8 Kilaw's boy ran off with their boxing champ. That village! Dirty slatterns, the
lot of them.

9 They say we skimp on our temple donations. Only they would think up such
sacrilege!

10 The temple's examiner is their people! She never admits our youngsters as
students.

Village life in the Hundred Red Scales lacks one major component: voices. Nobody
talks. Not aloud, anyway.





SEVENTEEN PALLID BELLY, FAVOURED CHIEF

Laughs at anything you say.

He runs Broad Fluff Scale, a crowded town on the second-largest island. The goddess gives, he says. Praise the goddess!

There's no divine blessing, here. Just cutthroat business. Pallid Belly owns the only cotton groves in the entire archipelago. He hires thugs to sabotage rival crops.



FIFTEEN STONE BROW, WARRING CHIEF

Stares at you and does not stop.

She leads Tight Crook Scale, the southernmost settlement. And therefore the one most threatened by King Narawatu's rogue warships.

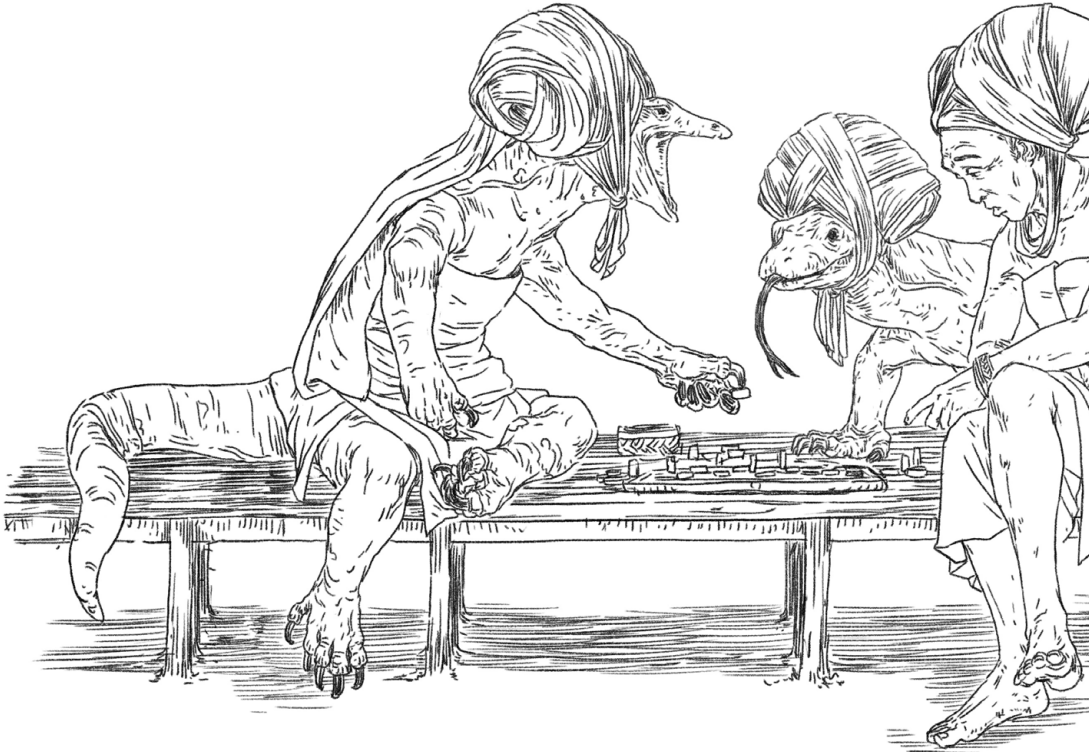
The temple sends no wardens, no aid. So she has allied with the otter-folk. She will swear herself to their piratical fish-god, if she has to. She must protect her people.

LANGUAGE IN THE HUNDRED RED SCALES

Monitor-folk do not speak, and did not make words. Their culture is one of signs, mimes, and context.

Their stories are woven into fabric as geometric shapes and repeating patterns, as animal figures entwined with floral motifs. They wear their histories as fashion.

Theirs is a language of implication. When a woman points at a diving fish on her scarf, then smiles at you -- what is she saying?



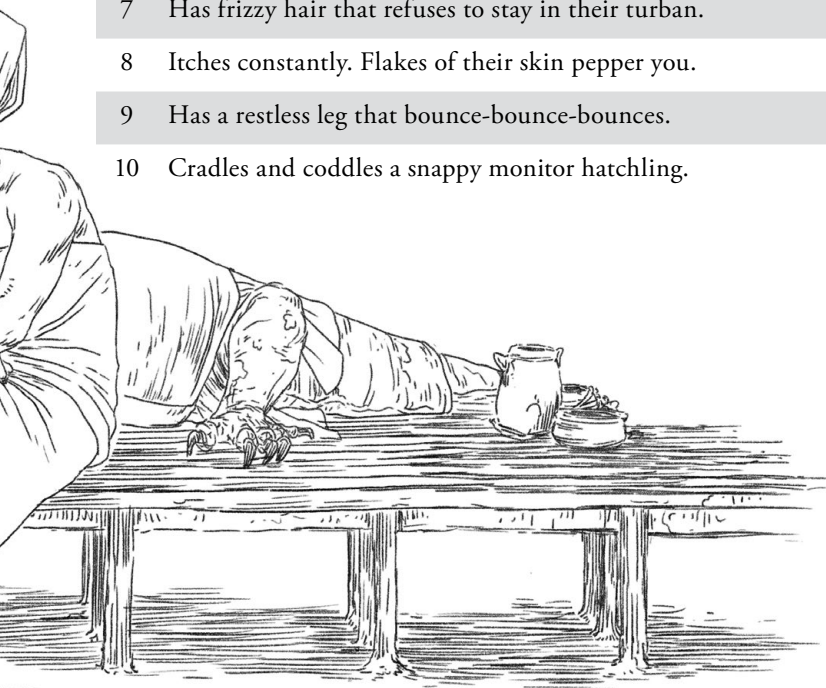
MAN-FOLK OF THE HUNDRED RED SCALES

Everybody understands mainlander speech. But speaking it marks you as a tourist. Nobody loves a tourist.

Humans are gendered male, as a whole -- like their god Pa, who murdered Hundred Red Scale. Tradition says they make poor cloth; the textile arts are sacred to the goddess, and she remains leery.

This person:

- 1 Has a split tongue, dyed purple, like a monitor's.
- 2 Is blind in their right eye -- a venom clam's doing.
- 3 Has a hand missing -- they dueled a crab knight.
- 4 Involuntarily speaks words aloud. An immigrant.
- 5 Has a thief's tattoo on their forehead. It is faded.
- 6 Spits a syrupy gob, every six seconds. Accurate.
- 7 Has frizzy hair that refuses to stay in their turban.
- 8 Itches constantly. Flakes of their skin pepper you.
- 9 Has a restless leg that bounce-bounce-bounces.
- 10 Cradles and cuddles a snappy monitor hatchling.



They have mainlander-style names. Kilaw will introduce herself with the signs representing “kill” and “law”; Ewal will flash “ear” and “wall”.

This one motions:

1	“Ash”
2	“Sill”
3	“Coal”
4	“Jay”
5	“Toe”
6	“Dam”
7	“Shed”
8	“Rum”
9	“Paw”
10	“Queue”

And:

1	“Shin”.
2	“Can”.
3	“Mien”.
4	“One”.
5	“Lee”.
6	“Dew”.
7	“Wier”.
8	“What”.
9	“Shock”.
10	“Quay”.

And is:

1	Covered in suck-marks, bleeding punctures. A clammer, she has just lost a friend to a pack of mudskippers. Looking to mount a hunt, in revenge.
2	Stretching, limbering up. A dancer, they are practising for an inter-island contest. Harassed by a trio of peeping toms. Would really like them gone.
3	Careful not to step into any shade. If he does, his face flickers like a strobe light. A witch in disguise, delivering a spell to a buyer in the village.
4	Stained red from fingers to elbow. A dyer. Fearing they will never win the goddess’s love, they secretly use imported lac. The sin of counterfeiting!
5	Blue-black, missing her front teeth. A boxer. She has never won a fight. Desperate to get better, willing to try anything. Is not above cheating.
6	Surrounded by adoring lackeys. A checkers champion. Good at the game, not great -- but their chorus of fans will heckle opponents to distraction.
7	Garlanded with sprigs, nuts, fruit. A herbalist. Has too many unguents bubbling away to leave his yard; bring back some beach hibiscus, will you?

- 8 Careful not to go out under moonlight. If they do, their red tattoos glow ultraviolet. A saboteur serving the indigo god, armed with bleaching hexes.
- 9 Collecting skeins from a clothesline. A weaver. Overworked; the next sarong she completes will come alive and flee -- a mischievous textile spirit.
- 10 Accompanied by the tang of marine guts. A fish-farmer. Their floating home was raided by dolphins. The culprits are still gamboling in the bay.

MONITOR-FOLK OF THE HUNDRED RED SCALES

A monitor's name is given after their eleventh year, and before their twenty-first. This monitor signs itself as:



1	Eleven	1	Front	1	Snout
2	Twelve	2	Fold	2	Neck
3	Thirteen	3	Rude	3	Shoulder
4	Fourteen	4	Roaring	4	Back
5	Fifteen	5	Porcelain	5	Knee
6	Sixteen	6	Parch	6	Tail
7	Seventeen	7	Loud	7	Tooth
8	Eighteen	8	Lame	8	Lung
9	Nineteen	9	Yielding	9	Gut
10	Twenty	10	Yolk	10	Liver

Always descriptive: Eleven Yolk Snout may mean she has a sniffly nose; Eighteen Roaring Gut might ironically point to how quiet he is.



TWENTY LATE CLAW, LIGHTNING FIST

Unconsciously picks at his many, many scars.

A prodigy of the six-limb boxing art, Late Claw is the youngest warden the temple has ever taken. He has more scars than any of his seniors.

He wants more. His drive is easy to understand: he was last of his clutch to emerge. Now he must be first to the fight, fastest to strike, quickest to slay the foe.

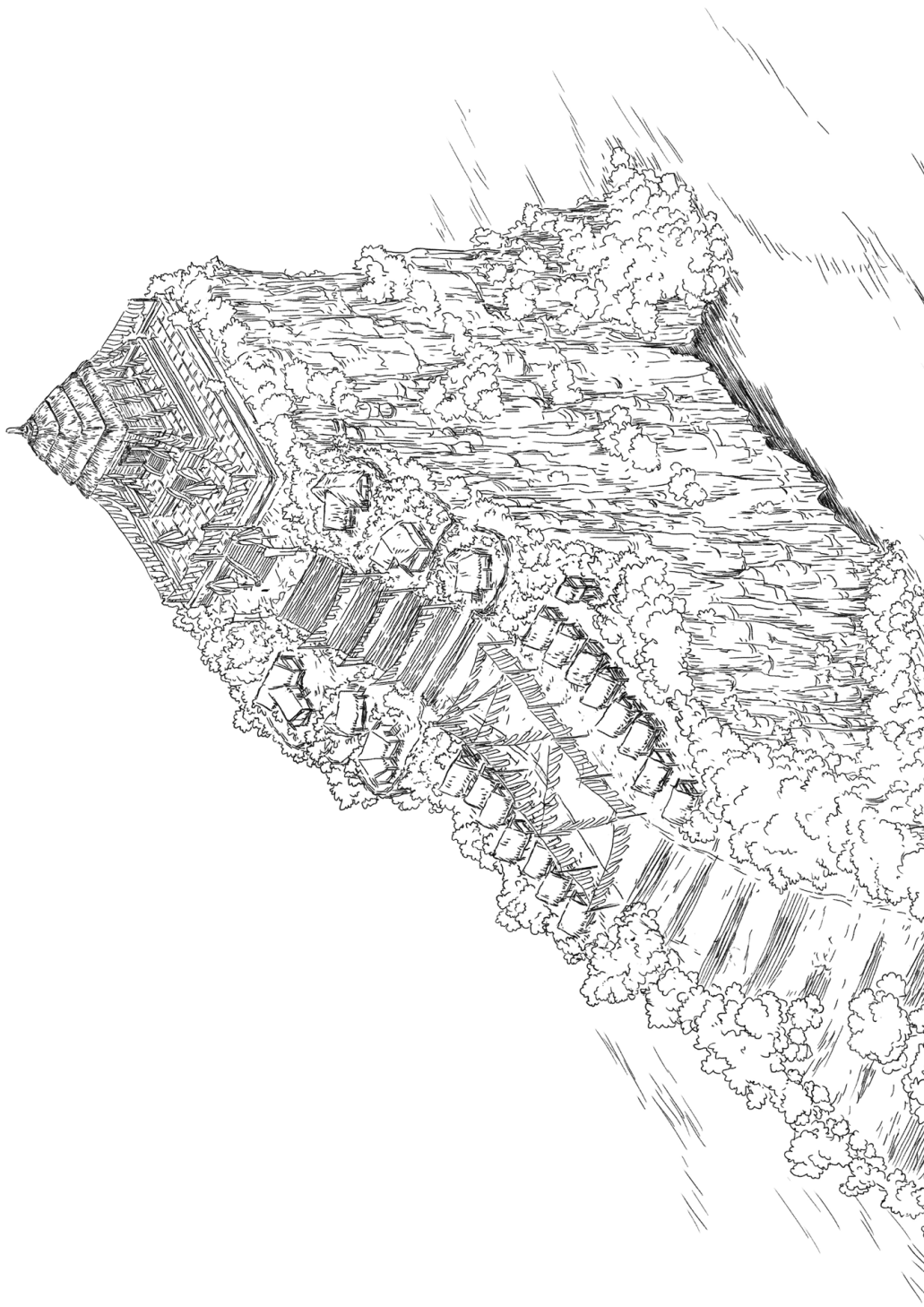


THIRTEEN SILK BONE, WANDERING DANCER

Scarves threadbare, bangles tarnished, flautist baggy-eyed.

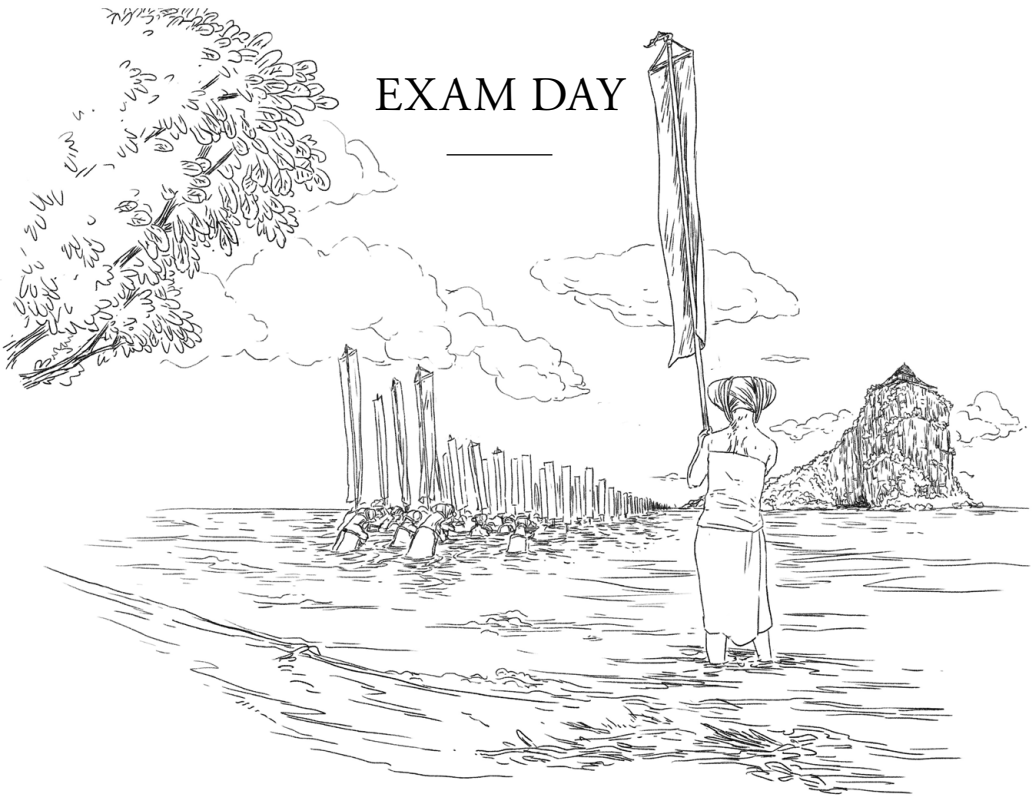
If patterned cloth are books, dancers are moving pictures. With each masked vogue and billowing pose they bring to life the cultural memory of monitor-kind.

Silk Bone usually tours the mainland. Secretly a temple spy, she has trailed indigo cultists back to the isles. She thinks she can take them herself. She is wrong.





EXAM DAY

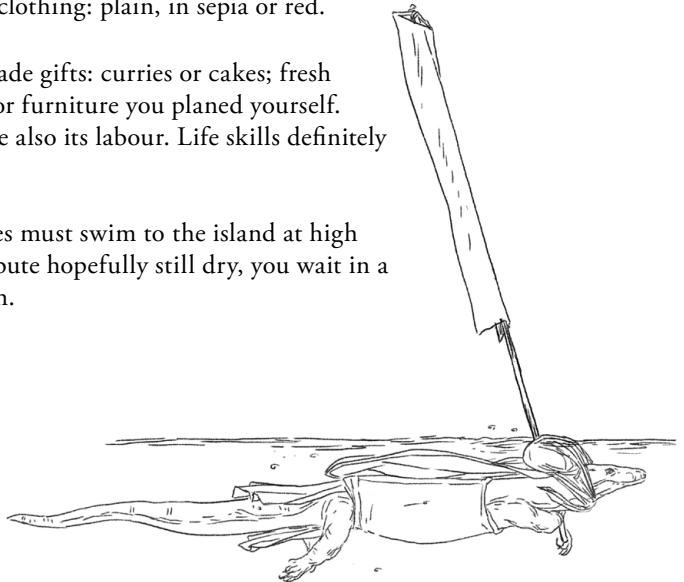


The temple on Little Red Scale teaches weaving and dyeing. These are holy arts. And lucrative arts. Textiles are the Hundred Red Scales' primary export.

So admission is competitive. Towards the end of the dry season candidates gather. You must dress in self-made clothing: plain, in sepia or red.

You should bring self-made gifts: curries or cakes; fresh fruits and greens; tools or furniture you planed yourself. The temple's students are also its labour. Life skills definitely count in your favour.

You and other candidates must swim to the island at high tide. Shivering, your tribute hopefully still dry, you wait in a line on the narrow beach.



LITTLE RED SCALE

Ultimately, the priests judge your cloth. An examiner scrutinises your soaked sarongs:

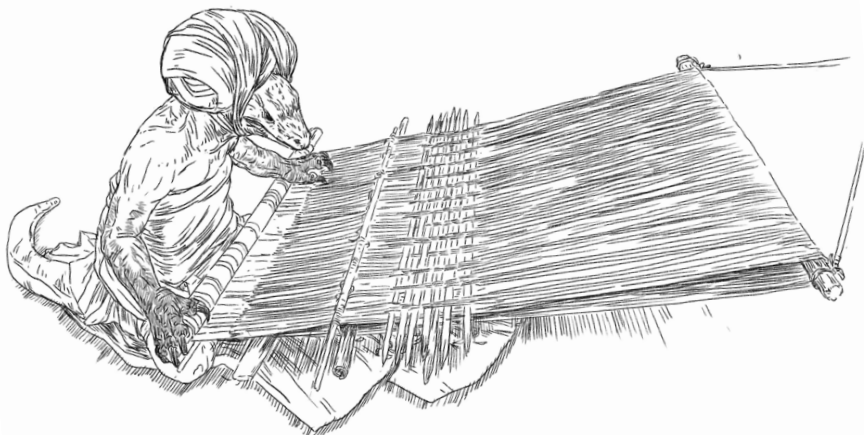
How well its weft winds through warp;
How evenly colour covers its breadth;
If the dye is fast, or leached by water.

The faults in your work may seem infinitesimal. The examiner may seem arbitrary or biased. They may prefer monitor-folk. They may prefer women.

Students will spend years cloistered on Little Red Scale. Rejects are dismissed. There are no appeals. Try again next year.



CLASSES ON LITTLE RED SCALE



Up past student housing are groves of sandalwood, candlenut and alum. In there shade somebody is teaching:

- 1 Fourteen Strong Finger, on the boiling of mangrove bark, from which the goddess bleeds her intense and sacred colour.
- 2 Sixteen Sandy Eye, on the uses of alum, lime and star-iron powder, mordants by which dye is changed and fixed to fabric.
- 3 Nineteen Closed Nose, on the arithmetic to which a warp is set -- the music pre-programmed into every woven pattern.
- 4 Twelve Lame Arm, on the ergonomics whilst strapped to a loom -- the particular arm motions and postures to avoid pain.
- 5 Twenty Late Hip, on the virtues of being stung by hot wax, while binding and knotting up a warp for ikat resist dyeing.
- 6 Thirteen Quiet Look, on the vocabulary of motifs both figurative and abstract -- how they may be poetic, banal, or profane.
- 7 Twenty Late Claw, on safer sparring technique -- control. Control! Go full power and you risk killing your boxing partner!
- 8 Fifteen Whole Heart, on nothing at all. Sitting. And breathing. The mind roils with a thousand voices. Eventually it quiets.
- 9 Sixteen Quad Cunt, on the seven thousand and seven configurations of the lovemakers' art. Exhaustive and exhausting.
- 10 Eleven Eaten Ear, on the warm-up exercises necessary before any dance performance, so muscle injuries are avoided.

Done wordlessly, via gesture and demonstration and class participation. Bit the students are distracted by:

- 1 A heron, flying over their heads, gripping a parcel with a sizzling fuse. Beguiled by indigo cultists, it will bomb a meditation hall.
- 2 Their classmate, a boy now vomiting sand flies -- a swarm with every heave. Everybody runs. The pranksters responsible snigger.
- 3 An argument. It is the dye mistress and weave master, deep in a theological dispute. They have escalated to stamping, hissing.
- 4 Their eagerness to bully an exchange student. They wave randomly at her, mocking her inability to understand sign language.
- 5 An aristocrat reclining on a palanquin, with sunburnt guards. King Narawatu. He scoffs and chortles loudly at everything he sees.
- 6 A shadow that blots the sun. As Sri Suka alights, her wings beat wind like a helicopter's flurry. Here for a chat with the high priestess.
- 7 Their own drowsiness. The day is so humid, even their teacher nods off. The lone acolyte still awake pokes her peer. He falls over.
- 8 A tumbling brawl of limbs, tails. Two priests in love with the same student. The sin of jealousy takes root, even in the purest hearts.
- 9 Their own sniggering. Two monks have tumbled out of a shrub, mid-fuck. The teacher tuts and begins critiquing their technique.
- 10 A textile spirit, loose from the temple like laundry blown awry. The temple snipes give chase. But their beaks are not quick enough.



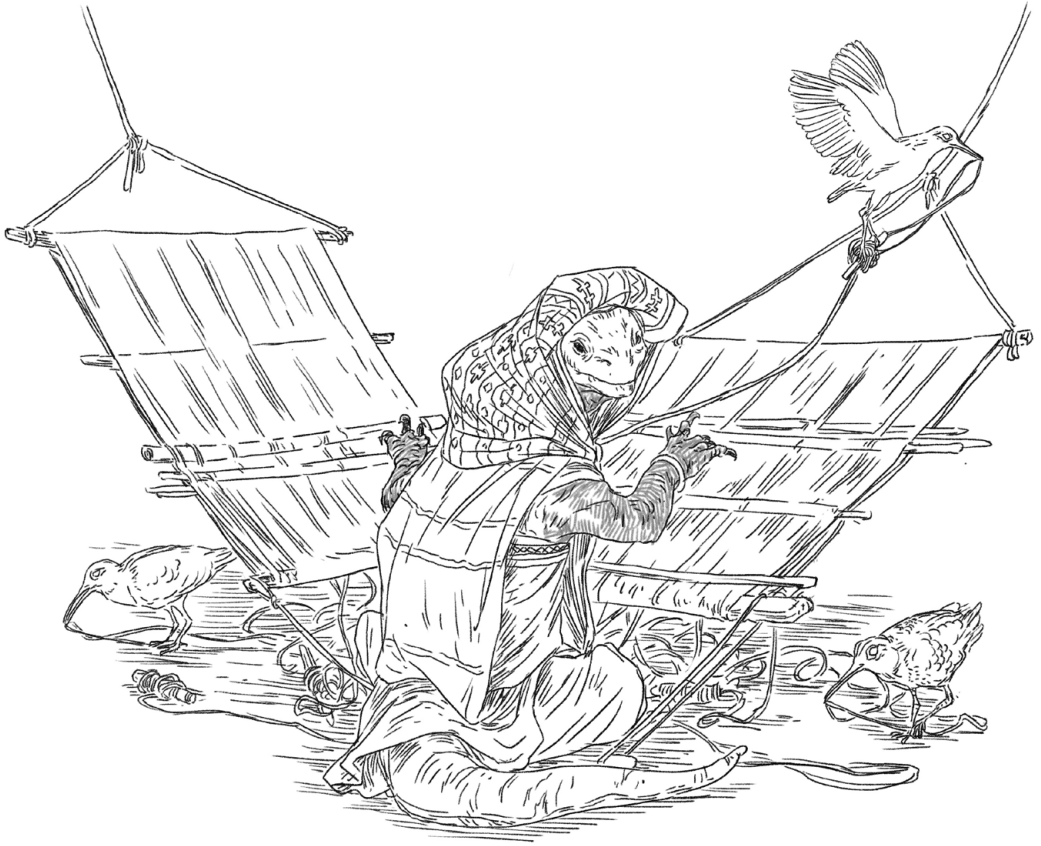


SIXTEEN SANDY EYE, TEMPLE STEWARD

He was the only human hatched in his clutch.

He did not let that stop him. He bought a masking spell from a witch. Only if you are wearing a disguise yourself, can you see that Sandy Eye is no monitor.

Now he owes the witch. She periodically has him sneak into the temple's catacombs, and lead one of its interred dead into the sea.



THIRTEEN QUIET LOOK, WEAVING MASTER

Looks over their shoulder every few moments.

They originally built their network of dancer-spies to track down and destroy imitation fabrics. Counterfeits devalue both the goddess and her arts.

Over decades they uncovered the true extent of the indigo god's reach. It scares them. Suspects somebody in temple leadership is a traitor.



SEVENTEEN SOOT SKIN, DYE MISTRESS

Red eyes, albino scales. Arms stained magenta.

Rarely leaves her mansion. It is stuffed with herbs, tinctures, mineral powders. She is a tireless, compulsive tinkerer.

With the right mordants, mangrove bark makes powerful blacks and cool blues. Soot Skin believes these hues also glorify the goddess, and wants them unbanned.



TWO-HUNDRED-AND-EIGHT RED SCALE, HIGH PRIESTESS

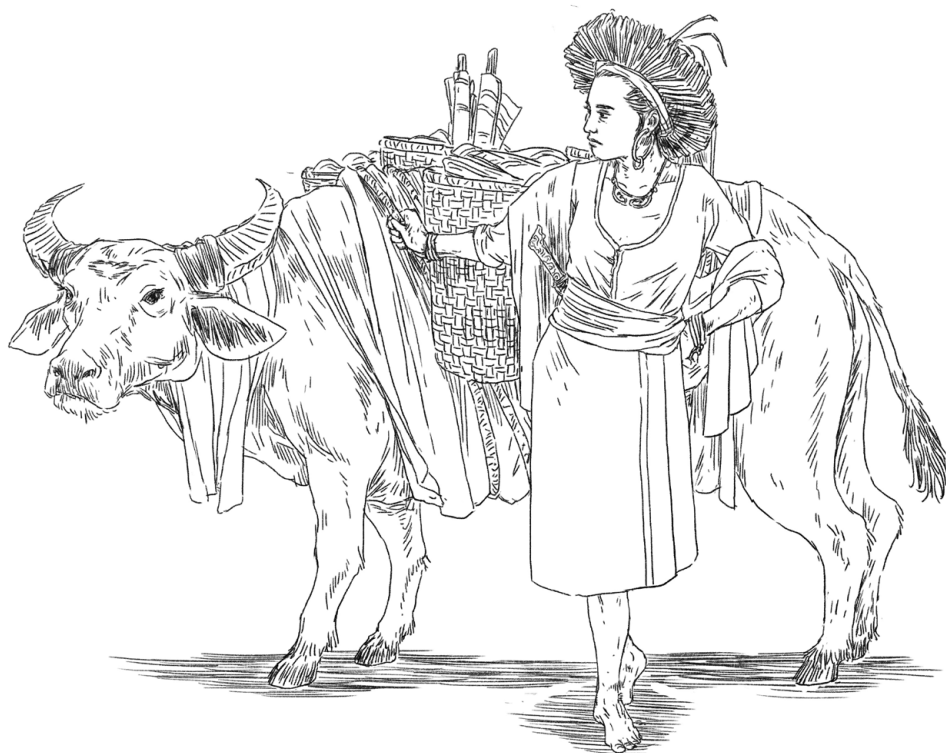
Dyed crimson from head to tail. Her dewlap flop-flop-flops.

Inscrutable on purpose. Often pauses to contemplate a random object, as if struck by religious insight. Especially if you are waiting on her to make a decision.

Her priests bicker. Textile spirits flash angry images. There are envoys, threats, village petitioners. Two-Oh-Eight spends more time in the catacombs, nowadays. The dead ask less of her.

GUESTS TO LITTLE RED SCALE

There are six mansions on the hill, but only four chief priests; the other two houses are reserved for visiting dignitaries. Little Red Scale always seems to be hosting.



AKUILALA, GROUCHY MERCHANT

Impatience persecutes her like an invisible mosquito.

Has a shipment of fine silks. She bought these at a bargain; their previous owner died a grisly death, and stained the cloth with gore.

No matter, she thought. She'll ask Little Red Scale to re-dye them, then sell them for a killing. The priests agreed to help. So far, they've done nothing.



NARAWATU, DEFEATED KING

Afraid of the ground. He is royalty, so touching earth is taboo.

Wears a gold helmet with a gold-mesh veil. King Narawatu's palanquin is notched and singed. His bid for Kurakarta's throne sank with most of his fleet.

Requests supplies for his return journey -- silk, in bolts; bullion, in tonnes. Otherwise his captains will stay, and supply themselves by force.



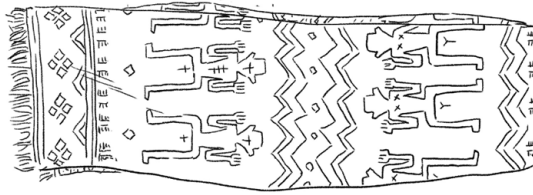
SRI SUKA, KITE GOD

A giant brahminy kite, white of breast and red of wing.

Sri Suka adored the goddess, but never worked up the nerve to court her. Now she guards Hundred Red Scale's body like a jealous lover.

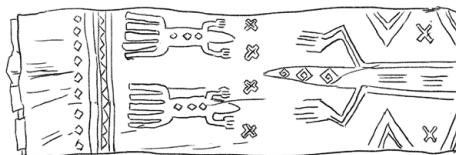
Sometimes Sri Suka feels itchy, and begins to pick at her feathers; pecking at her wings and feet so violently they fall off -- and he slithers away as Sri Duka, the serpent witch.

TEXTILE ARTS OF THE HUNDRED RED SCALES



Proverbially well-made, and only ever in shades of red. Cured in sunlight and sea spray. This length of cloth is:

- 1 Scarlet silk, so soft it never makes a sound.
- 2 Tasseled with polished brass bells. Grating.
- 3 Cinnabar with fuzzy tangerine criss-crosses.
- 4 Treated with wax, to be proof against water.
- 5 In gradients -- as if it were blood, undulating.
- 6 Ruby in thin slivers, like television scanlines.
- 7 Vivid burgundy and heavy. Will stop a sword.
- 8 Russet and yellow. Skirting blasphemy, this!
- 9 Edged with silver sequins. Catches the light.
- 10 Carnelian, as stiff as rolled-up manila card.





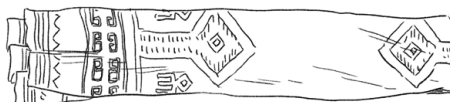
Its face is a parade of repeating figures, echoed motifs. Patterns that tell of the goddess's life are sometimes infused with her favour:

- 1 Changing Dancer. Female shapes face male shapes, in alternating bands. Worn, you manifest the genitalia of every sex.
- 2 Jubilant School. Moonyfish in an interlocking grid. Worn as a turban, those you kiss are compelled to follow you for the day.
- 3 Mother's Measure. Twenty-four teardrops in a line. Held to an injury, a teardrop dissolves into the wound; instantly it scabs, heals.
- 4 Absent Mountain. Human forms, arranged into pyramids. Worn as a sarong, your skin turns as tough and textured as limestone.
- 5 Way Home. Columns of solid colour. Flung across a gap it extends -- a rigid, walkable bridge. Provided the opposite side is visible.
- 6 Reluctant Lover. A checkerboard of dark and light. Worn as a cloak, the dark spots sprout spines, deadlier than a porcupine's.
- 7 Kite's Cowardice. Eyes, eyes, eyes -- unblinking diamond eyes. Own this and you see, in your mind, anything it is able to see.
- 8 Pa's Gift. Flowers and assorted animals, arranged into the outline of a monitor, laid lengthwise. Cover yourself, and die.
- 9 Suppliant Frog. Amphibians hiding in a forest of weeds and vines. Touching your skin, you fade unnoticed into the background.
- 10 Lazy Weaver. Lizards bracket empty length. Touch it and think. Patterns appear and disappear, a record of your thoughts.



Even the best are made with a minute flaw -- typically a thread in the very middle, pulled slightly out of alignment.

To make a perfect length of cloth arouses its divinity. A textile spirit is born. Like an eel it swims the air -- easily bored, occasionally murderous.



THE TEMPLE

Whenever the priests catch a textile spirit they bring it to the temple.

Inside sits a monitor. You see her limned silhouette against the eastern window. She turns with a swish. She beckons with a hand of silk.

Her arms and legs are cotton. She is a bundle of textile spirits, knotted together. She accepts the new arrival; ties it to herself. Willingly or not, it joins the sum of her wisdom, her godliness.

She is an avatar of the goddess. It is a great honour to make love to her. She is difficult to satisfy.



UNDER THE TEMPLE

A series of limestone galleries winds through the island's belly -- down, down, down, opening finally onto the sea. High tide drowns the lowest cave.

All the temple's high priestesses are interred here: taxidermied skins, stuffed with scrap fabric and dehumidifying hexes, to combat the dripping damp.

Sixteen Sandy Eye has been removing bodies in secret. These return later, their stuffing replaced with pebbles. Nobody has noticed, yet.



THE WITCHES

Dogma likens them to maggots, infesting the goddess's corpse. They shrug -- if you say so. They are part of the archipelago, more so than any living creature.



SRI DUKA, SERPENT WITCH

A giant coral snake, blue as poison cobalt.

He is not big enough to devour the islands whole. So he will do so, figuratively. Currently conspiring with indigo cultists to destroy the temple.

Sometimes Sri Duka feels itchy, and begins to shed his skin; his new scales are feathers, and they are red and white -- and she steps away as Sri Suka, the kite god.



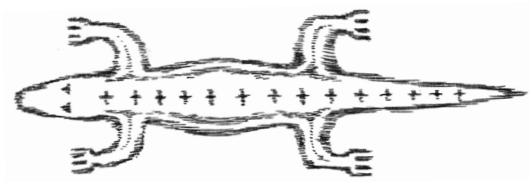
TWELVE SOFT HISS, MUDSKIPPER WITCH

The mudskipper on her arm speaks for her.

“Tell us what you need,” it says. “We can help!” But Soft Hiss’s help does not come free. She is the one who gave the steward Sixteen Sandy Eye his spell of disguise.

Resents the priests; wants them humbled. With her monitor-folk puppet skins in place she will invade their temple, and free the textile spirits.





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